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PRELIMINARY REPORT

ON THE

OBJECT AND DUTIES

OF THE

MEDICAL OFFICER

OF

HEALTH.

BY

F. W. PAVY, M. D.

MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH TO THE PARISH OF
SAINT LUKE, MIDDLESEX;

AND

LECTURER AT GUY'S HOSPITAL.

TO THE
V E S T R Y
OF THE PARISH OF ST. LUKE,
MIDDLESEX.

GENTLEMEN,

The first act of my official connexion with your Parish that I have to discharge, is to lay before you (through the medium of your Sanitary Committee), a professional statement of the principal duties I shall have to perform, and to point out to you the objects it is desired by system to attain; for your new Medical Officer of Health will have to pursue a path, as yet unfamiliar to you,—because upon ground that has been hitherto un-trodden by others.

In framing this Report, I have carefully considered the clause in the Act under which the appointment of Health Officer has been made, and the other Acts that give him powers to move; I have attentively perused the Instructional Minutes issued by the General Board of Health, and have placed myself in communication with the Medical Officers of Parishes, who have had time from their more early election, to get the machinery appertaining to the duties of the office, into working operation. And, after the most careful consideration, I feel convinced I cannot do better than recommend as a guide, the course that has been for some Years past so successfully adopted by Mr. Simon, the recent able Officer for the City of

London. Our great and prime object is to be practical in all that is effected, and until we have had time to gain experience ourselves, it will be wise to work upon the experience of others.

According to the expression of the Act; one portion of the duties of your Officer of Health, will be "to inspect and report periodically on the sanitary condition of your Parish, to ascertain the existence of diseases, more especially epidemics increasing the rate of mortality, and to point out the existence of any nuisance or other local causes which are likely to originate and maintain such diseases, and injuriously affect the health of the Inhabitants; and to take cognizance of the fact of the existence of any contagious or epidemic diseases, "and to point out the most efficacious mode of checking or preventing the spread of such diseases."

The intention here implied, is the practical application of one of the main principles of our medical art, that has been hitherto so much neglected in this Country. Your Parish, like other Parishes, — has Officers, but too assiduously engaged in alleviating sickness and combating disease amongst the poorer classes in the densely populated Lanes and Alleys of their districts. Much of this sickness — many of these diseases owe their origin to sanitary evils, — to causes, in fact, which are of a preventible nature. And, however attentive, however successful my professional brethren may be—and I do not scruple to say they are—in their treatment: yet, we all must acknowledge, we all must assent to the truth of the old adage that "Prevention is better than cure." Until now, no one has been professionally retained, except upon a temporary occasion, for bringing about so desirable an end. Your Parish, it is true, has had the advantage of an active Sanitary Committee, and much good has doubtless been effected by its labours. But, for the comprehensive application of Sanitary measures, an intimate

knowledge is demanded; not only of the working of the animal frame under the varied conditions of health and disease, but likewise of those external agencies which are capable of interfering with, or even of arresting its action.

This is the object for which your Officer of Health has been appointed. He will have to look, on the one hand, to the fluctuating condition of the population as regards health and disease: on the other, to the means that are provided for its Sanitary accommodation; and as occasion requires,—to suggest the adoption of those Sanitary measures for the public good, that can be enforced by the Law.

Should any one be sceptic enough to question the practical utility or detract from the importance, of such a Sanitary provision; — let him refer to the history of large Armies encamped in a limited locality, without sufficient attention to the observance of Sanitary Rules. The atmosphere quickly becomes polluted;—Fever breaks out and spreads with a rapidity equalled only by its severity. The ranks are thinned by a disease which now marches irresistably onwards, but which might have been prevented at its onset. The evil does not, however, stop here. The infected air distributing itself to the neighbourhood around,—bears with it sickness and death.

Just so, Gentlemen, in your own Parish. Visit the very centre of it, and you will find, Courts so densely populated — that it excites astonishment and surprise where its Inhabitants can be stowed away: houses so badly ventilated—that you wonder how so many lives can possibly be sustained in them; and means so scanty for getting rid of the refuse from such a congregation—that you are horrified with the sights you behold and the stenches you encounter. All perhaps for a while proceeds passably onwards. These miserable, almost inhuman-looking beings move through the ordinary operations of life; but the condition of their constitution, and of the

locality they inhabit is ripe for any outbreak that may occur,—is a sure hot-bed for the growth and propagation of any infectious disease that may spring up. Sickness and death at last appear, and do not confine their ravages to these unwholesome districts; but, contaminating the air we breathe, are carried to our doors, where, by contagious influence, they develope themselves upon some near relative or perhaps upon ourselves.

Thus, Gentlemen, by systematic and well-regulated endeavours to remove these evils, which no one can deny, exist, and exist but too extensively in your Parish: you are not only carrying out the dictates of humanity towards your less fortunate fellow-creatures,—helping those who have not the power, or the knowledge how to help themselves,—but at the same time securing safety to yourselves and your families.

There is, moreover, another aspect, under which I would wish you to view the measures to be undertaken by your Sanitary Officer—an aspect which we can all well understand and appreciate, because it touches upon the Funds of the Parish. It is true, by no means in our power, are we enabled to obviate death. Under the constitution of the present World, death is a necessary consequence ;— an inevitable sequel of life. Life has, however, its natural duration. And, when our natural term of years is completed, another generation has sprung up, capable of providing for and maintaining itself: but, when a contaminated atmosphere, when an unwholesome habitation leads to an untimely end; — the wise order of nature is defeated, and a widowed mother with her family of helpless little ones may be thrown upon your Parish, to entail not simply pounds, but even—(I speak advisedly) some hundreds of pounds expense before you shall have finshed with them.

To enable the Medical Officer of Health to discharge the important and responsible duties I have

adverted to; it will be necessary on the one hand, that he should be informed of the *fluctuation of sickness and death* in his Parish;—and on the other, that he should institute and superintend a *systematic inspection of the poorer localities*, in order to seek out and suggest remedies for existing sanitary evils.

Of the fluctuation of deaths or mortality returns; as those contained in the weekly report of the Registrar-General are totally unavailable, on account of their too general character, — I beg to suggest to you, that a similar course be adopted to that which I have observed in some other parishes I have visited; viz:— that an arrangement be made with the district Registrars, to furnish the Officer of Health with a weekly return of the deaths in his district, detailing in each case, its cause, the house in which it occurred, and the age and sex of the individual.

Such a return must necessarily form one of the most valuable instruments, it is possible for the Officer of Health to possess, as it will render him cognizant, not only of the diseases prevailing in his Parish which affect life, but where, and what they are; and should they be of an epidemic, endemic or contagious nature, it will be his duty to institute an inspection of the locality, and suggest means for the removal or neutralization of those local influences, which, might favor the extension of such complaint.

A record of these returns will also prove of incalculable service when digested or arranged into quarterly and annual tables; as we shall thus be informed of the most unhealthy parts of the Parish, and shall know where to direct our greatest vigilance,—where the application of Sanitary measures will be most required. We shall, in fact, from year to year, be enabled to map out our Parish into its relative healthy and unhealthy localities,

and shall thus be in a position to direct our attention accordingly.

Next in importance to a detailed return of our Parochial mortality, is that of our Parochial sickness. Here again: however active, however assiduous, an Officer of Health might be, it would be completely impossible, singly and unaided, to obtain a knowledge of more than a very minute portion of the sickness prevailing in his Parish. I would, therefore, again resort to machinery that is already in motion. The Medical Gentlemen in attendance on the Parochial Poor, form the only reliable source from which such desirable information can be obtained. But I am deeply sensitive that the duties of the Poor-law Medical Officer, are already so onerous in comparison to their compensation, that it would be an act of injustice, to tax them with more, unless an adequate re-quital were made, which, I feel, however, I have no power to suggest. Under these circumstances, the only means at my disposal, are, to solicit that permission be obtained for your Officer of Health to select such information as he may require from the books of the out-door Medical Gentlemen, which, I am informed, are made up, and forwarded every Friday to the Board of Guardians. Such is the plan at present adopted by the Officer of Health for the City.

I am not unmindful, Gentlemen, of the assistance to be derived from the communication of information that may fall within the knowledge of the Medical Practitioners of the Neighbourhood; and I shall always endeavour to cultivate that friendly co-operation, wherever it may be offered; — which cannot fail to act beneficially to our Parish.

I have now to speak of the system of sanitary inspection, to which I have, as yet, only just adverted. In accordance with what is elsewhere being effected, I propose to superintend your Inspector of

Nuisances, in making a systematic inspection or supervision of the dwellings of the poorer classes throughout your Parish; and reporting upon their condition as to ventilation, drainage, cleanliness, water-supply, and means of accommodation, with appliances for getting rid of the necessary refuse. Such reports will furnish us with a knowledge of the condition of our Parish; and by directing our attention to Nuisances that are calculated injuriously to influence health, will enable us, by enforcing their removal, to effect a Sanitary Improvement of our Population. But, do not let me be misunderstood! Do not for a moment suppose, that it is proposed to establish an obnoxious system of inspection, that will throw discredit on our efforts. It is not to such habitations as yours, that this system is intended to apply; but to those miserable localities, where sanitary evils exist so abundantly, that no one will encourage the system more, than the Inhabitants themselves.

The remaining portion of the Duties devolving upon the Officer of Health, are more of an occasional or consulting nature. He will have, according to the continuation of the words of the Act, "also to point out "the most efficient modes for the ventilation of Churches, "Chapels, Schools, Lodging-houses, and other Public "Edifices within the parish or district, and to perform "any other duties of a like nature which may be required "of him." He is, in fact, to constitute your professional sanitary referee, and, as such, I beg to assure you at the commencement, that I shall have but one aim in view:—conscientiously to discharge the duties of the Office, with an unprejudiced, an unbiased hand, and with due consideration to the pecuniary interests and sanitary benefits of the Inhabitants of the Parish.

I shall furnish your Sanitary Committee, with a Report at each Meeting; and propose to lay before the Vestry, — Quarterly and Annual Statements of our

sanitary condition and progress. For these purposes, and for the effective working of the office, I would recommend for your consideration, a selection (which I place in the hands of the Committee), of the most needful of the printed forms, that have for some time past been made use of, by the recent Health Officer for the City.

As regards the Water Supply to your Parish, I shall from time to time, submit it to Chemical and Microscopic Analysis, to see that the requisite standard of purity be maintained.

In conclusion, Gentlemen, as we shall have to work much together, upon so important and vital a question; I shall do all in my power to preserve that harmony between us, which cannot fail to prove so desirable. Let us work hand-in-hand. Let us exercise the utmost caution and discretion, in deciding upon our measures of sanitary improvement,— always mindful that in any change that is effected, public health stands *versus* private pecuniary interest. But, when our decision shall have been made, let us carry out vigorously and energetically the powers confided to our care, and thus fearlessly discharge the responsibilities of our trust.

I beg to remain,

Gentlemen,

Yours most respectfully,

F. W. PAVY.

3, Finsbury Square,
April 23, 1856.

At a MEETING of the SANITARY COMMITTEE of
the Vestry of the said Parish of Saint Luke, held on
Wednesday, the 23rd day of April, 1856, at 3 o'clock
in the afternoon precisely.

Mr. ALFRED WALKER, Chairman.

It was resolved unanimously;—

That the REPORT of Dr. PAVY be printed,
and that a Copy thereof be sent to each Vestryman of
the Parish.

JOHN PARSON,

Vestry Clerk.

Vestry Clerk's Offices,
Workhouse, City Road,
April 23rd, 1856.

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